

# **Bird, Berry, and Blossom Subscription Program**

**Location of Project:** Wiscasset, Maine (Northeast Region)

**Purpose:** Morris Farm, the sponsoring organization for this project, identified several goals and aspirations for their 2000 growing season. They included:

- Encouraging local, seasonal eating in the Wiscasset area and reminding residents in their area of the local availability of some staple foods,
- Providing a local, organic alternative to chemical-intensive, foreign-grown flowers,
- Educating participants about small-scale, organic food production,
- Investigating the viability of subscription marketing of fresh food as an alternative marketing strategy in mid-coast Maine, and
- Identifying and demonstrating the risks associated with those strategies.

**Accomplishments:** The first stage of the project involved planning the size of the subscription program, based on the farm's production capacity. Farm managers determined how many subscriptions the farm could handle and what the appropriate price should be for each subscription. The price scale was based on the costs of production for each crop, the standard prices for those crops in each region, and a price break for subscribers in exchange for advance payment. The final step in the planning process was to establish pick-up days and times for the subscriptions that would not interfere with farm operations.

When these schedules were determined, the subscription program was publicized through the Morris Farm's quarterly newsletter (which has a readership of about 900), local newspaper articles, a direct mailing of roughly 85 program fliers, and the Farm's website. The program was also promoted to attendees of Morris Farm special events and educational programs. The total number of subscriptions sold was 43, including 5 egg, 9 broiler chicken, 7 flower, and 22 raspberry subscriptions.

Production began immediately after the planning and publicizing process. The egg subscription was the first to begin, since the flock's production began to come out of its winter lull as soon as

the weather became consistently warmer. The first batch of chicks for the broiler chicken subscription arrived in April. Flower production began in early spring in the greenhouse by starting both annuals and perennials from seed, dividing perennials, renovating the Farm's existing flowerbeds and creating new beds. The raspberry patch was pruned, mulched, and fertilized according to its regular annual maintenance plan.

**Lessons Learned:** The first real challenge in the program was establishing a location for pick up. At the beginning of the season, the construction of the organization's farm stand was not completed. This created some confusion later on in the program because earlier in the season, subscribers were asked to come to the office, rather than to the farm stand, to pick up the merchandise.

In addition, all of the subscriptions, except for the eggs, started later in the season than planned because of the unusually cold, wet spring. As a result of the poor weather, the chickens were of a smaller size than hoped throughout the season, though feedback about their flavor and overall quality was consistently good.

Once the flower harvest season got underway, it was relatively successful. The cool weather was excellent for calendula and

some of the early perennials, such as Shasta daisies and lupines. Other varieties that proved excellent for cutting were iris, scabiosa, nigella, foxglove, yarrow, cosmos, phlox and various rudbeckias. Varieties that were introduced, but did not end up getting used for arrangements were lavatera, which had branching stems that weren't conducive to arrangements, salvia strata, which was too short and somewhat anemic, cleome, which had thorns, and larkspur and lobelia, neither of which germinated. Bachelor buttons provided an excellent filler, but were extremely labor intensive. In general, having the flowers mixed in with the vegetable garden added a great deal to the farm's aesthetic and captured the fancy of many of the farm's visitors.

The raspberries, which were expected to come into full production around the July 4<sup>th</sup> timeframe, did not come into production until mid-July, and instead of having a bumper crop, they came in a slow trickle for just barely eight weeks. The consistent rain during the pollination season may have kept a number of pollinators undercover, and the raspberry fruiting period appeared to have been undermined by migratory flocks of birds.

Had the raspberry production been closer to the projections that were made based on the variety and the age and health of the patch, the problems with the subscription pick up routine and with people forgetting their pick up day and time would not have been so severe. Making matters worse, the organization learned nearly 2 weeks into the raspberry harvest that the best way to store raspberries was not to cover them immediately with cellophane, but to let them dry first in the cooler before covering them.

The raspberry production was so low, in fact, that after the second week of the subscription, the organization had to split the subscribers into the two groups for pick up, one on Tuesday and one on Friday, instead of the original Wednesday pick up plan. With the change in the pick up schedule, it was necessary for the organization's representatives to be available for at least 2 hours, and usually more on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Friday afternoons, so that subscribers could pick up their merchandise. The change in scheduling also caused confusion among subscribers. The amount of time required to have managed two pick up days quickly outweighed the economic benefits of the program.

**Conclusion:**

In the period of fast food convenience and seasonless, supermarket eating, it is quite possibly too much to ask modern consumers to

make a special trip at a specific time for only one, two or three specific items. Consequently, the more traditional community supported agriculture (CSA) model of large shares that include everything that is in season at a farm may be more reliable, more satisfying for members, and of greater economic benefit.

Furthermore, as one of the participants pointed out during the end of the survey, with or without the recent rise of fuel prices, it does not necessarily make environmental sense to have consumers drive out of their way to a farm to pick up just a couple of food items (as opposed to a week's worth of produce) in an area that has no public transportation.

Several of the subscribers indicated that the primary reasons for participation in the program were to support the Morris Farm, to keep food dollars in the community, to obtain organic products or naturally raised food and flowers. Seven participants chose "other" as the reason for their participation, which included looking for something fun to do with their kids, not wanting to grow raspberries themselves and wanting high quality produce.

When asked in what ways the program could be improved, participants suggested either more flexibility or stability in the pick up schedule, an e-mail reminder list, making more produce

available for sale either through subscription or in the farm stand,  
and offering poultry year-round.